

Preparing to go the distance all over again



Irish Olympic team Chef de mission Sonia O'Sullivan and London 2012 Olympic Games chairman Sebastian Coe survey the Olympic Park in London yesterday. (Photograph: Morgan Treacy/Inpho)

OLYMPIC GAMES: SONIA O'SULLIVAN'S athletics life now revolves around others. No longer herself.

There was a time when Ireland held its breath every time she stepped onto a track at a major championship. The woman from Cobh was the great deliverer of drama and medals. She held the heart of the country as she travelled the world conquering and failing. And with every fall Ireland lived it too. It fell with her. It picked her up.

Sonia's journey seemed to be our own and for over two decades we travelled with her from her first European win in Helsinki in 1994 to the crowning glory in Sydney 2000 when she won the 5,000 metre silver medal. But no championship was too enthralling not to liven it up with soap opera twists.

There were the Chinese in the 1993 World Championships and changing in the tunnel at the Atlanta games in 1996. Sometimes she'd just run away from the stadium after a bad race. But medals came too; five European, two World, one Olympic. Four World Cross Country, one World Indoor.

Life after running. These days it's mostly in Australia but Teddington in London is still O'Sullivan's patch.

The grounds around Lensbury, the old Shell Oil country club, where many of the Irish Olympic squad will stay; Bushy Park and the jogging patch around the deer herd, where she clocked up the miles in an almost 20-year career.

Ireland's chef de mission is on familiar ground for London 2012.

Back in London her change from the track to mentoring athletes will draw on those decades. Already she is imparting the clues to living life at the top, the pressure, the environment, the preparation.

"The mindset has changed since 1992 when I first went to the Olympics. This is where I wanted to be before my Olympics and my World and European Championships. This is where I was," she says of this corner of west London.

There is a hands-on availability about O'Sullivan. There is an immediacy about her and the information she possesses. She is a walking, talking athlete's guide to high performance. She is no logistics expert or great team leader. But in her vapour trail across the tracks of the world she has experienced everything an athlete might expect to over the course of a month of Olympic life next July. O'Sullivan can strip down the mindset and the preparation to the spare bones.

Pressure? "Pressure could be something like your parents wanting tickets. It depends how you define pressure and how you deal with pressure. Pressure could be worrying about where your parents will stay. Pressure could be you being in the Olympic Village and your parents are out in Wimbledon and they want to see you.

"We want to know all that information because we don't want you [athletes] going across London to meet people or give them tickets. Roy Keane, in his book, talked of people looking for tickets every week. And that was his biggest worry, to satisfy the need for tickets and stuff. When I was in the Olympics, I never got tickets for my parents. I never organised their travel, never knew where they were staying, I didn't want to know about it. I just said 'you have to do it yourself'."

At one stage it seemed that Sonia would go on and on. The endless pursuit of another challenge, another marathon or championships, something to keep it moving forward. Anything as long as it didn't stop. Back sometime then she said she would never retire, that running was a thing you didn't stop doing, something that was part of life. But over the last number of years she has come to realise that there is comfort in life's transitions. There is another place to go after the podium. She feels she has found that place. At least for now, and for the next seven months.

"When I didn't run in Beijing, that was the end. That broke the chain," she says. "After Athens . . . I didn't think that would be the last time I'd run at the Olympic Games. A lot of people thought it was, with that thing that happened in the last lap where I waved to everybody. They thought that was it.

"Maybe it was. I don't know why I did that. Now, I probably do. I was saying goodbye but I didn't know. I always say that an athlete's career is mentioned in Olympic cycles. When I didn't qualify for Beijing, that was it. But I didn't address it at that time. I kept on running but didn't have any realistic goals, was just running for enjoyment."

Even in London she sees the acute angles. It's just like Ireland in many people's opinion. And it is and it's not. The language, the lifestyles, the cars, the roads, the disposition of the people and the weather. It is and it's not. O'Sullivan knows that within the certainties of London there are unknowns too. There are pitfalls.

"I am familiar with it here and it is a simple and easy environment to work in. But there are things athletes need to know," she says. "It's humid here and the air is not very good. You need to get used to it. I know from being here in summer and then travelling home that it's much fresher in Ireland. The air is heavier here and something the athletes do need to get used to." As a runner she would never have contemplated flying to London from her home in Australia for a two week visit. The fine tuning of her body could not have taken the flight or the time change. Now her Olympic team role requires it and she has made the trip three times in the last few months. Busy Park is there, the running routes around Richmond and Teddington and the comfort of familiar territory. It is all there but is now part of the background just like the races.

"I don't go back and watch them," she says. "I look back to 1993 and the Chinese and I think at the time I was so focused on what I was doing that I didn't want to be distracted by getting into a war of words. In some ways you kind of wish you were a bit more vocal and dig in a bit more, but then again maybe I would have been kind of going down the wrong road . . . then they didn't turn up the next year!

"It's amazing that some of those world records still stand and no questions about it . . . 8:06 for 3,000 metres for a woman is kinda out of this world. It was part of my career. There's nothing you could really change. Even if someone came out now and said they were cheating it's not really going to change anything, is it? It's going to be a little story in the papers but you can never [replace] that feeling of crossing the line and winning if you don't cross the line winning. You often see that medals get taken off people and others get presented with it. It's just a technicality and a statistic."

On Saturdays she walks the dog and then takes her children to their sport. For a long time it was just her. Now time must be shared with Sophie and Ciara.

“You can see the desperation,” she says. “I see Sophie playing basketball. You see this desperation and I see what I used to do.” Rangy and lean and at 42 years of age, she looks at it all now with different eyes.

Location, location: Ireland's base

Many of the Irish Olympic team will be based in The Lensbury resort in Teddington, west London.

It is a 20-minute walk from St Mary's University College (Strawberry Hill), where world-class facilities are available to Irish athletes.

China, South Africa and Japan will also base their athletes there or close by. A new running track was laid there last year for a cost of €116,500.

The Thames River is adjacent to Lensbury, which also has top-class facilities and is a perfect venue for flat water rowing.

Many of the Irish team are expected to stay here, while some other sports such as the boxers and sailors will not.

The boxers will probably prepare in France and Germany while the sailors will be based in Weymouth. If a hockey team qualifies they will also stay here and use water-based synthetic pitches in the locality.

Athletes tend to do their preparatory work at Lensbury and St Mary's before going into the Olympic Village a night or two before their event begins. The newly built (and entirely sold) Olympic village is in the Borough of Newham in east London.

By Johnny Watterson